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# 'The Subplot' Review: Creativity and Censorship in China

Chinese readers have more to choose from—online and in print—than ever before. Writers remain wary.



By *Lee Lawrence*

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As democracies around the globe wrestle over where to draw the line between free speech and unlawful lies and what—if any—rules should govern social-media platforms, we might assume that under nondemocratic governments such matters are cut and dried. Not so. Anyone who has ever lived in a communist country knows that the rules are often vaguely worded and the system enforcing them capricious. A book the authorities ignore today might trigger their anger tomorrow. In China, writes Megan Walsh in “The Subplot: What China Is Reading and Why It Matters,” some call this the “anaconda in the chandelier” with the onus being on “publishers and writers to second-guess what might cause the snake to strike from above.”

Outside China, many assume that anything that gets past the censors must be, at best, without artistic merit or, at worst, propaganda. After all, Xi Jinping made it clear in 2014 that art and literature should “take patriotism as its muse, guiding the people to establish and adhere to correct views of history, the nation, the country, and culture.” Yet to consider banned books the only ones worth reading, Ms. Walsh argues, is still a political litmus test. “It would benefit us as foreign readers wanting to understand Chinese society—as well as our own—to seek out fictional worlds, rather than the broad-brush political and economic narratives of the public domain.”

Ms. Walsh began exploring the world of China's writers and artists in 2004 while she was living in Beijing. In "The Subplot," the London-based arts writer compiles a kaleidoscopic picture of fiction written and published in mainland China over the past 10 to 20 years. Despite a proliferation of trendy bookstores, most fiction reaches its audience online in what Ms. Walsh describes as "the largest self-generating industry of unregulated, free-market fiction in the world."

The confluence of technology, economic growth, periods of relative creative freedom and the persistence of writers has produced an unprecedented diversity of voices. Some who lived through the Cultural Revolution, for example, only to see it—and their own past—erased from the "correct views of history," publish haunting stories of alienation. In Mo Yan's "Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out," the narrator is reincarnated as one animal after another, never coming back as a human and therefore incapable of affecting or participating in China's often violent transition from feudalism to socialism to capitalism. Among ethnic minorities, Ms. Walsh shows how Tsering Woeser and Pema Tseden expose the murky, painful realities of being "happy Tibetans"; and how the Uyghur author who goes by the pen name Tarim writes love poems in his native tongue but uses Chinese for political verses. In a poem translated by Ms. Walsh, he asks: "Friends say / Chinese poetry needs metaphor / I ask / Is that the same as a bat liking the dark?"

There is also plenty of entertaining fare in Chinese fiction today—light, even silly romance novels; personal accounts that come across like verbal selfies; tales of superheroes and crime; and legal mysteries—all reflecting particularities of Chinese society, from its social stratification to the general acceptance of state surveillance in exchange for low crime rates.

Throughout, Ms. Walsh weaves together thumbnail descriptions, historical contexts and trenchant analyses. She does this so deftly that we move seamlessly from, say, an idealized vision of life as a young woman in premodern rural China—as scripted by Li Ziqi and disseminated in highly popular online videos—to science-fiction penned by astrophysicists, coders and engineers in which the authors probe the limits of transhuman life or spin cautionary dystopias. In the chapter "Pushing Boundaries," the richness of Uyghur, Tibetan and Mongolian writings follows discussions of China's underground comics scene and the clandestine realm of *danmei*, a genre imported from Japan in which young women write about romance between boys—in itself a fascinating window into China's gender dynamics.

Contemporary developments often have historical precedents. During the 1920s, in the immediate wake of the May Fourth Movement, the plight of rural migrant workers was told in stories known as *diceng wenxue*—"bottom rung" or "subaltern" fiction—mostly written by middle-class urban authors. Not anymore. Today, in what Ms. Walsh calls "one of the most significant literary breakthroughs in post-Reform China," the estimated 300 million Chinese who have migrated from rural areas to work in cities have wrested control over their own narratives. Whether poets like Xu Lizhi and Xie Xiangnan, memoirists like Fan Yusu or novelists like Sheng Keyi, these writers are

forging stories from their personal experience of disillusionment, danger and exploitation.

Ms. Walsh is unabashed in her admiration for the creativity in Chinese fiction and the inventiveness with which some writers have consciously dodged or confused the anaconda—whether by presenting fact as fiction, inventing otherworldly societies, or, like countless generations before them, making clever use of the homophones and visual puns that the Chinese language offers to write one thing while expressing another.

But she also soberly appraises present and future dangers. Already the mere act of using their native Turkic language can land Uyghur authors inside a re-education camp. Control over internet platforms is tightening. Recent developments in Hong Kong may cut off an outlet for writers on the mainland at a time when authoritarianism poses a growing threat to their counterparts across the globe.

All the more reason to heed Ms. Walsh's call and pay attention to how writers in China have been responding to political and societal upheavals. To her credit, Ms. Walsh doesn't corral the information into a neat and tidy thesis. She explicitly states: "This is not a comprehensive overview, but a glimpse." But the glimpse is enough to short-circuit any impulse we might have from afar to reduce China's vast array of writers to a dichotomy of dissenters and conformists. Engaging, informative and—considering the ground it covers in 135 pages—astonishingly nuanced, "The Subplot" primes us to dig into her list of suggested further reading.

—*Ms. Lawrence writes about Asian and Islamic art for the Journal.*

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